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Department of English

University of Bristol

3/5 Woodland Rd

Bristol

BS8 1TB

jessica.fay@bristol.ac.uk

A Question of Loyalty: Wordsworth and the Beaumonts, Catholic Emancipation and

Ecclesiastical Sketches

Jessica Fay

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In the first decade of the nineteenth century, following the Act of Union with Ireland, the issue of Roman Catholic Emancipation (or ‘The Irish Question’) was a source of political tension in Britain. How could Irish Catholics be loyal to a Protestant throne and how socially dangerous would it be to allow Catholics access to seats in Parliament? Lord Redesdale, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, explained the problem:

I can consider no man, whatever his profession of loyalty may be, as truly a loyal subject of a King, whom he thus holds up to his people as an object of disaffection, nay of hatred, because that King holds a different opinion on matters

of religion. [...] Catholic Priests still teach their flocks that all who refuse obedience [to the Pope] are guilty of a wicked rebellion against divine authority.¹

There was a current of prejudice and scaremongering in the conservative periodical press that drew on the principles of the Glorious Revolution (1688) and the terrorism of the Jacobite Uprisings of 1715 and 1745. William Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register* espoused a typical expression of distrust when it stated that 'a mind capable of giving serious credence to the doctrine of transubstantiation' could be 'no great acquisition' to a Cabinet Council or a British House of Commons.² Debate continued into the 1820s with an exchange of rival publications including Robert Southey's *The Book of the Church* (1824), Charles Butler's *Book of the Roman Catholic Church* (1825) and Joseph Blanco White's *Practical and Internal Evidence against Catholicism* (1825). The Catholic Emancipation Act was eventually passed in April 1829.³

William Wordsworth was a vocal anti-emancipationist; the sonnet series, *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822), was his public contribution to this dispute. As a deliberate reaction against the Catholic Relief Bill of 1820, this volume of one hundred and two carefully researched sonnets narrates a history of Christianity in England. The poems were intended to remind British readers of the protection they received from a National Church in which the excesses of popery and the abuses of monastic indulgence were tempered. Geoffrey Jackson's introduction to the Cornell edition of the sonnets states that Wordsworth had engaged with the issue 'at least since it was debated in the House of Lords on May 17, 1819'.⁴ However, the origins of Wordsworth's opposition to Catholic Emancipation and the context for *Ecclesiastical Sketches* reach further and are more complex than has previously been noted. Moreover, as I will explain in this essay, they are inflected by the relationship he had with his friends and patrons, Sir George and Lady Beaumont.

In December 1809, Lady Beaumont sent a copy of a pamphlet entitled ‘An account of an English Hermit, by a respectable Clergyman’ enclosed in a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth. This two thousand-word narrative of the life of an unknown nonjuror named Thomas Gardiner, by an unknown Anglican clergyman named Thomas Barnard, was composed sometime after the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, copied by hand, and circulated in 1809.⁵ The manuscript has (quite understandably) been ignored by scholars interested in the trajectory of Wordsworth’s political opinions; yet greater knowledge of the Beaumonts’ heritage and their political allegiances reveals possible reasons why Lady Beaumont sent the pamphlet to the Wordsworths at this particular time. Analysis of the manuscript, alongside contextual information about the Beaumonts, helps to resituate Wordsworth’s objections to Catholic Emancipation and, significantly, casts light on the tone of the sonnets contained in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*.

On receiving the pamphlet from Lady Beaumont, Dorothy replied: ‘I should not have been so slow to thank you for the most interesting narrative of the life of “an English hermit”’, continuing in the postscript: ‘I ought to have said more of the pleasure we received from the interesting history of the Hermit, but I have not room for it—Coleridge wishes it could be published in the Friend—but perhaps this cannot be allowed’.⁶ Coleridge corroborated that Barnard’s document had been the subject of some discussion at Allan Bank: ‘Miss W. will probably have informed your Ladyship, how deeply I was interested with the account of the Hermit. If it had not been published, I should like to publish it in the Friend, with remarks’.⁷

The text describes the life and character of a hermit, Thomas Gardiner, as it was gathered by Thomas Barnard during two visits to the hermitage. The pamphlet states that the first of these meetings took place in August 1745, by which time Gardiner had been living in isolation for fifty years. Before he made this retreat, he had been:

elected fellow of [A]ll [S]ouls [C]ollege [Oxford] about the year 1678, where he continued to reside till the revolution; after which, refusing the oaths to the government, he lost his fellowship, and soon after retired to Amney [Ampney] near Cirencester in Gloucestershire (at that time the seat of the Pleydell family) and he became tutor to Robert Pleydell Esquire, the last male heir of it (WLL/30).⁸

Gardiner's refusal of the Oath of Allegiance to the new Protestant monarchs, William and Mary, and his eviction from Oxford indicates that he was a nonjuror. The nonjurors were a group of over four hundred bishops, rectors and laymen; after the Glorious Revolution they permanently lost their ecclesiastic and civic positions because they refused the Oath of Allegiance, believing it would contradict the pledge they had previously sworn to James II. Many of these men went into quiet retirement and nonjuring continued into the eighteenth century as a minority tradition.⁹

Barnard states that Gardiner had been called 'the silly hermit, the popish priest, the mad man' by members of the community near his hermitage; this was characteristic of the prejudice nonjurors faced more widely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ The nonjurors' commitment to the apostolic basis of the Anglican Church (like that of the Caroline Divines of the Restoration era, and later the Tractarians who valued the lineage connecting current bishops with the first Apostles led by St Peter) was often mistaken for popish allegiance and perfidy. The date of the meeting is therefore significant: Barnard attempted to assure his readers that Gardiner was not a threatening Jacobite by describing him tranquilly engaged in solitary study and devotion during the violent summer revolt that attempted to put Charles Edward Stuart on the throne. Barnard confirmed the righteousness

of this particular nonjuror by closing the meeting with a tentative question about Gardiner's view of the Church of England:

it was with some diffidence I asked him his opinion concerning the church of England; but he readily answered, that he believed it the most pure, and apostolick [sic] church now in being, though he would not but differ from it in some things, as in particular, that he believed all men would be finally saved (WLL/30)[.]

For nonjurors, continuous episcopal government was a matter of the highest importance as it linked the contemporary Church to the Apostles, and hence to Christ, through the unbroken chain of their successors, the bishops.¹¹ The nonjuror's conscience forbade him from recognising the realignment of the throne, regardless of James II's Roman Catholicism, because the crowning of the new King and Queen threw that apostolic process off course. In other words, James II's faith was less problematic than the disruption of the line of succession that had begun with the Apostles and extended to the present Church government. By the time Barnard visited the hermitage, Gardiner had come to acknowledge that the Church of England was '*the most pure, and apostolick church now in being*' (my italics). Hence the hermit who had been loyal to the Catholic James II and his successors had grown to accept peacefully the authority of the Protestant monarchy.

As he is described in the pamphlet, Thomas Gardiner physically resembles characters from Wordsworth's poetry such as the Leech Gatherer of 'Resolution and Independence' and the Blind Beggar of Book VII of *The Prelude*. Gardiner 'was almost or altogether blind', he struggled with a broken thigh and 'had a fine, serene, open, reverent countenance, and the greyness of his hair and beard [...] gave his face the appearance of something almost more than human' (WLL/30). Whilst Gardiner differed from the old leech gatherer and the London beggar in terms of education and background, the experience and effect of Barnard's meeting

with the hermit was similar to these Wordsworthian encounters. Barnard perceived that Gardiner seemed to have been sent from another world to teach the value of work and charity, and to correct prejudice against his kind. Despite his infirmity, Gardiner had the power to make Barnard see beyond the limitations of the physical world. Just as Wordsworth had felt ‘admonished’ and had his mind turn ‘As with the might of waters’, Barnard was transfixed and transformed by the hermit who led ‘[a] life of such wonders, and [was] so very different from the generality of mankind’ (WLL/30).¹² The primary aim of Barnard’s piece is to convey how fortunate and grateful he was to have met with Gardiner and to impress upon the reader the extent of the sustaining effect of the meeting. However, the pamphlet is also explicitly didactic:

I cannot conclude this imperfect account of the life of this [C]hristian hermit without wishing (that, allowances being made for sequestering himself from the world and some little peculiarity of sentiment and behaviour) both myself, & those who read the relation of a life of such wonders, would, in regard of his great indifference to worldly matters, his true piety his extensive charity, his entire resignation to the will of God — Go and do likewise (WLL/30).

Gardiner’s life is presented as exemplary; he was a highly intelligent, committed Christian and a responsible, generous citizen: ‘He was not only remarkable for the passive virtues, but also for the active graces of the [C]hristian character; his charity in particular was above his station’. Significantly, those virtues of devotion and tranquillity did not impinge on the wishes or rights of others and the clergyman’s purpose is to encourage his readers to cultivate similar qualities.

Why then was this ‘account of an English Hermit’ being circulated in 1809, and why did Lady Beaumont in particular take the trouble to send it to the Wordsworths? In the first

decade of the nineteenth century the concept of an ‘English Hermit’ would have been striking. The hermitic tradition had incorrigible connotations (reiterated by popular Gothic literature) with Roman Catholicism: ‘English Hermit’ was almost synonymous with that seemingly contradictory thing, an “English Catholic”. This would have put the reader of Barnard’s text in mind of the increasingly fraught Catholic Emancipation dispute, which from 1807 had pivoted around questions of Royal Oaths. The narrative confounds the expectations of its early nineteenth-century reader by explaining that Gardiner had adopted a monkish way of life precisely because he was loyal to the English throne. It thus begins to look like a piece of emancipationist propaganda.

Lady Beaumont carefully qualified her intention in sending ‘An account of an English Hermit’ to her friends at Grasmere: ‘I send this account for the amusement of your fireside. The relator is a character well known in this neighbourhood and the truth unimpeachable’ (WLL/30). On the one hand she presents the text as a piece of entertainment and knows that the Wordsworths had poetic interests in hermit figures; on the other hand the verification of the respectability of the author together with the legalistic undertones of ‘unimpeachable’ implies that the text has some serious civic relevance. This document is not like other frivolous, jaunty hermit narratives that had been popular at the end of the eighteenth century, nor is it anything like a sensational Gothic tale.¹³ Lady Beaumont draws attention to and echoes Barnard’s didactic tone and thus indicates her moral approval of Gardiner’s position. As I will go on to explain, the Beaumonts had deep-rooted sympathies in favour of Roman Catholic Relief, but Wordsworth’s opposition to emancipation grew as he moved closer to the Beaumonts from 1806 onwards.

Wordsworth and his family resided at Hall Farm on the Beaumonts’ Coleorton Estate in Leicestershire between October 1806 and April 1807. On 15 November, Dorothy wrote to

Lady Beaumont (who was then at Dunmow in Essex) noting what she had been reading in the Coleorton library:

I have been reading in Fox's [sic] Book of Martyrs—not straight forward; but choice parts, it is a very interesting Book[.] The account of the Deaths of Ridley and Latimer (especially the latter) is most affecting and impressive. There are some sweet passages in them, yet I do not think the whole of such merit that they ought to have been published (*MY*, i. 100-101).

Foxe provides a graphic description of the trial and execution of the Oxford Martyrs carried out in 1555 by commissioners of the papal party. The work is a touchstone for debates concerning the processes through which prejudice against Roman Catholics became embedded in English historical consciousness.¹⁴ Although Dorothy was not impressed with the taste of the whole study, she had reason to turn to the *Book of Martyrs* on this particular occasion. Her letter is dated two days before a General Election that was dominated by the Catholic Question.¹⁵ The months that the Wordsworths spent at Coleorton in fact saw two General Elections and a change of government leadership that hinged on George III's refusal to breach his Coronation Oath, which protected the alliance between the State and the Church of England and was used to exclude Catholics from positions of political power.

The November election was partly a consequence of the death, on 13th September, 1806, of Charles James Fox which Wordsworth had marked with his poem 'Composed at Grasmere, during a walk, one Evening, after a stormy day, the Author having just read in a Newspaper that the dissolution of Mr Fox was hourly expected'. In sending a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* to Fox in 1801, Wordsworth had identified in him a 'constant predominance of sensibility of heart' which made him a genuine advocate for the middle and lower classes.¹⁶ But five years later this 'sensibility' had brought him to campaign for the civil rights of Irish Catholics. In this context, Wordsworth's emphasis on Fox's 'dissolution' implicitly compares

the uncertainty of the present political disruption with the dispersal of monastic power after the Reformation.

Fox and Lord William Grenville had formed a coalition after William Pitt's death in January 1806. Their 'Ministry of All the Talents' immediately promised to make equality for Irish Catholics a priority, and Fox adopted Pitt's role as champion of Catholic Relief.¹⁷ After Fox's death Grenville was forced to secure his position with a General Election, attempting to ensure that the House contained a sufficient number of members who were sympathetic towards the Irish Question. Grenville was elected Prime Minister on 17th November. However, before the Wordsworths left Coleorton the 'Ministry' had entirely collapsed. In April 1807 the government lost the support of the King as well as the general public through its attempt to allow Irish Catholics greater capacity for promotion in the armed forces. George III claimed that granting these concessions would contradict his Coronation Oath and Grenville was forced to resign. The in-coming Tory-led government and the popular cry for "no popery" meant that Catholic Emancipation remained a distant prospect. The Coronation Oath created a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

Although the Beaumonts were members of the Church of England, their Catholic heritage made Coleorton a poignant place from which to witness this political upheaval. As Wordsworth acknowledged in his Coleorton Inscriptions, Grace Dieu Priory (just a few miles from Sir George's estate) had been owned after the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Beaumont's recusant ancestors.¹⁸ In 1806 Wordsworth read the poetry of Sir John Beaumont (1583-1627), who had grown up in a household that allegedly sheltered Edmund Campion and was related to conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot.¹⁹ Sir John had been banished to the manor house at Grace Dieu in 1607 when his counter-Reformation poetry made him unpopular at court; his explicitly religious poetry was subsequently censored.²⁰ Wordsworth visited the ruined site of Grace Dieu twice during his residence at Coleorton and agreed to

help Sir George organise a new edition of Sir John's poetry. Sir George believed that his persecuted ancestor's poems 'might be of service' in the public domain at a time when the Catholic Question was a contentious issue.²¹ He thus appealed to Wordsworth's own confidence (evident when he had sent a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* to Charles James Fox) in poetry's capacity to influence political decision-making. The scheme never in fact materialised.

Furthermore, Lady Beaumont had several close Roman Catholic relations and friends. Her sister, Mrs Francis Fermor, had married into one of the most prominent Catholic families of the English landed gentry.²² Wordsworth remarked that Mrs Fermor was committed to her husband's faith, but that she did not discuss 'public issues' with him.²³ Since childhood Lady Beaumont had also been friends with Henry Bathurst, Bishop of Norwich, who was one of only two Anglican bishops to defend the rights of Catholics.²⁴ On coming into office in 1806 he argued: 'it is surely requisite not only to lay aside every emotion of resentment, but to cultivate a cordial good-will towards Christians of every description, who are warmly attached to our civil constitution, and agree with us, moreover, in the great essentials of Christianity'.²⁵ He composed a pamphlet entitled 'The Justice and Policy of granting a full and complete Toleration to the Roman Catholics of Ireland' and supported Grenville in his efforts to push the matter in the House of Lords in May 1808 (Bathurst, 78 and 85). Another of Lady Beaumont's friends, Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle (1809-78), of Grace Dieu Manor, founded the monastery of Mount Saint Bernard at Whitwick in 1835, which was the first Catholic monastery to be instituted since the Reformation.²⁶

Wordsworth's awareness of the Beaumonts' sympathies was therefore inevitable and he was not willing, at any point, to enter into debate with them. This is perhaps to be expected, yet Wordsworth did regularly rant about the progress of the Catholic Emancipation movement in letters to other close friends and patrons on both sides of the dispute. In 1808,

for example, Francis Wrangham produced the sermon, *The Gospel Best Promulgated by National Schools*, arguing that Irish Catholics might legitimately be incorporated into the body of British citizens: ‘We may civilise, if we cannot convert: If [sic] we cannot make them protestants, we may make them patriots’. Wordsworth could not contain his indignation: I ‘do not go along with you in your sentiments respecting the Catholic question’.²⁷ Wordsworth made his hostility clear to his friend Wrangham again in 1813: ‘I cannot act with those who see no danger to the constitution in introducing Papists into Parliament’. A month later Dorothy Wordsworth made her brother’s position explicit in a letter to Catherine Clarkson: ‘William is decidedly against the Catholics, and I think he would convince you if you had an hour’s talk with him and you *shall*, and you *must* have it next summer’.²⁸ Wordsworth also entreated his friend James Losh, with whom he disagreed in politics, to be ‘not startled when I say that I am averse to further concessions to the Catholics’ and regularly shared his opinion with his patron Lord Lowther: ‘God grant that these people may be baffled! [...] Good Heavens! [...] I trust that you will not sleep on this momentous occasion’.²⁹ Given the extent to which Wordsworth was agitated by the issue (and generally forthcoming with his opinion) it is notable that there is no surviving correspondence between Wordsworth and the Beaumonts in which either party engaged in direct discussion of the matter. Seemingly Wordsworth did not want to cause his patrons and their relations any offence, nor did they want to educe his argumentative streak. If Lady Beaumont did wish to influence Wordsworth’s opinion, she may well have felt the need to do so covertly. This gives credence to the interpretation of the act of sending ‘An account of an English Hermit’ as an implicit attempt by Lady Beaumont to influence Wordsworth’s beliefs, without raising the topic openly. Did Gardiner have the capacity to admonish the poet as the Blind Beggar and the Leech Gatherer had done?

The setting and moral framework of Barnard's pamphlet make the text a vehicle for the promotion of the dignity the nonjurors demonstrated by remaining loyal to the English Church *and* to James II, despite that King's Roman Catholic beliefs. Anti-emancipationists in the nineteenth century believed that English Catholics could not be loyal to the crown, and that any concessions would undermine the identity of Englishmen. In refusing the Oath in 1689, Gardiner had neither committed to the papacy, nor undermined his devotion to the Anglican Church: he was an 'English hermit'. The narrative was perhaps being circulated amongst Lady Beaumont's friends because the Coronation Oath and the Oath of Allegiance formed the most substantial barrier to Catholic Relief at that time. Gardiner pointed a way out of this deadlock: his piety and virtue went beyond the bounds of the Oath and beyond his desire for any civil appointment or personal power. In this light, Barnard's narrative functioned in 1809 to promote the Christian virtues which dictated that Catholics should be afforded the right to vote and stand for parliament.

How then might this affect our reading of Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches*? Between 6th and 20th December, 1820, as he conceived of the plan for his sonnet series on the National Church, Wordsworth was once again visiting the Beaumonts at Coleorton. George Beaumont holds a prominent position in the Advertisement to the volume, first published in 1822:

ADVERTISEMENT.

During the month of December, 1820, I accompanied a much-loved and honoured Friend in a walk through different parts of his Estate, with a view to fix upon the Site of a New Church which he intended to erect. It was one of the most beautiful mornings of a mild season, --our feelings were in harmony with the cherishing

influences of the scene; and, such being our purpose, we were naturally led to look back upon past events with wonder and gratitude, and on the future with hope. Not long afterwards, some of the Sonnets which will be found at the close of this Series, were produced as a private memorial of that morning's occupation.

The Catholic Question, which was agitated in Parliament about that time, kept my thoughts in the same course; and it struck me, that certain points in the Ecclesiastical History of our Country might advantageously be presented to view in Verse. Accordingly I took up the subject, and what I now offer to the Reader, was the result.

When this work was far advanced, I was agreeably surprized to find that my Friend, Mr Southey, was engaged, with similar views, in writing a concise History of the Church *in* England. If our Productions, thus unintentionally coinciding, shall be found to illustrate each other, it will prove a high gratification to me, which I am sure my Friend will participate (*Sonnet Series*, 137).

As Geoffrey Jackson has suggested, this Advertisement seems to imply that Wordsworth's walk with Beaumont through the grounds of Coleorton preceded the conception of the sonnets and was a catalyst for the whole series: it is almost as if the two men contracted the design for *Ecclesiastical Sketches* together. But Jackson notes that Wordsworth had already placed an order for the set of books that would form the basis of the necessary historical research while he was in London between 9th and 23rd November (*Sonnet Series*, 129).

Wordsworth had in fact developed the plan before he arrived at Coleorton and it is only those few sonnets on Church Building that were inspired by their morning walk.³⁰ The national crisis of Roman Catholic Emancipation, with which Wordsworth had been concerned for

years, was in fact the motivation for the poems. Why then did Wordsworth give Beaumont such a prominent place in the Advertisement, especially given that their attitudes towards Catholic Relief were so divergent?

The Advertisement is a masterful display of Wordsworthian tact. Wordsworth delicately balances two competing sentiments: his affection for Beaumont and his commitment to oppose Catholic Emancipation. The structure of the Advertisement bears formal witness to the poet's diligence in preserving this dual allegiance. The passage opens with respectful attention to Beaumont, whom Wordsworth describes as a 'much-loved and honoured Friend'. Wordsworth emphasizes the mildness of the atmosphere and suggests that the amenable space in which they walked matched their spirits; the friends were in a temperate mood and they shared a single disposition. Beaumont's friendship is implicitly invoked as a source of inspiration for the sonnet sequence; he is a harbinger of poetic creativity which the beauty of the natural world reflects as a living record. Wordsworth and Beaumont were equally receptive to the active nourishment and fostering influences of the season and there is reciprocity between the men, and between them and the grounds of Coleorton; they look back and perhaps recall Beaumont's ancestors who resided in that place; they look forward and are filled with hope because a 'New Church' is about to be erected that will carry the Anglican tradition into the future. **Figure 1 here. 'Coleorton Hall' by Lady Margaret Beaumont (1808), ink on paper. Reproduced by permission of The Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere, UK.**

Alongside this expression of indebtedness, Wordsworth is cautious to dissociate his friendship with Beaumont from his unswerving political opinions. In order to retain the value of both, Wordsworth slips into the passive voice as he comes to the point of describing the composition of the sonnets: 'some of the Sonnets which *will be found* towards the close of this Series *were produced* as a private memorial of that morning's occupation' (my italics).

This is the only passive construction in the paragraph; it functions to distance Wordsworth from the production of the sonnets, suggests the discomfort he felt from disloyalty to his patron, and indirectly passes part of the creative process over to the restorative influences of the morning. Wordsworth's emphasis is very much on commonality of feeling, not on the material production and purpose of the poetry. There is further discomfort evident in the statement that a few of those sonnets were intended as a 'private memorial' to that cordial stroll: shared knowledge between friends about a private poetic memorial is meaningful precisely because it is implicit, but Wordsworth is keen to make the tribute publicly clear. The opening of the Advertisement thus shows Wordsworth, consciously or not, highlighting an allegiance to Beaumont in order to counter any resentment the sonnets may otherwise have engendered. Wordsworth had to tread carefully given that the political message of the sonnet series could have damaged one of the most important friendships of his adult life.

In the next paragraph Wordsworth reclaims the active voice and asserts a stronger sense of creative ownership: 'The Catholic Question [...] kept my thoughts in the same course [...] it struck me [...] I took up the subject, and what I now offer to the Reader, was the result'. The tone of the Advertisement has shifted: Wordsworth moves away from the harmonious natural setting and now presents his thoughts and actions forthrightly and independently. He implies that the course of his research had some origin at Coleorton but that it then followed its own path. Wordsworth goes on to note that this course of thought had unintentionally coincided with Robert Southey's anti-Catholic *Book of the Church* (1824).³¹ The mode in which Wordsworth aligns himself with Southey is less engaged; he does not feel harmony with Southey but the two men have accidentally produced similar volumes. The emphasis is on the commonality of the material, not the complicity of the authors. Southey's project is represented as gratifying because its similarity is purely serendipitous. However, Wordsworth was careful that his prepositions should not convey religious partisanship: it is to

Southey's 'concise History of the Church *in* England' which he gives his approval, not a 'History of the Church *of* England'. The distinction is small yet vital. The latter would risk devaluing Beaumont's Catholic heritage and undoing the encomiastic tone of the first half of the Advertisement. By privileging the history of Christianity in England as a whole over particular doctrinal codes of worship, Wordsworth effaces potential hostilities. The syntax builds to a cautious and complex union which holds in check personal friendships with the promise of 'a New Church'.

The layout of the Advertisement also functions to differentiate Wordsworth's expression of his simpatico relationship with Beaumont from the political argument of the sonnets. In the first edition of the text the opening paragraph is separated from the others by a blank line space, whereas the second and third paragraphs are distinguished more modestly via indentation.³² This peculiar typographical arrangement serves to split the Advertisement into two sections: one that has an emotive focus and the other that conveys the public purpose of the poems; one affectionately drawing in a close friend with whom Wordsworth does not agree, and the other referring in an unadorned manner to 'my Friend, Mr Southey' with whom he inadvertently does. Beaumont and the 'Catholic Question' are physically and visually segregated on the printed page. In the poet's mind, they are not to come into contention.

There are similarly conflicting sentiments held in balance within the sonnets themselves. Amidst a large quantity of conspicuously historical poems, including the 'Troubles of Charles the First', 'Laud', and 'Clerical Integrity', Wordsworth scatters a small number of sonnets capturing intimate human episodes. 'Catechizing', for example, evokes the occasion when as a child Wordsworth was called to church to recite answers from the catechism while his loving mother looked on anxiously. The result is a recollection of grief at her early loss, which is an uncommon occurrence in his poetry:

From little down to least—in due degree,
 Around the Pastor, each in new-wrought vest,
 Each with a vernal posy at his breast,
 We stood, a trembling, earnest Company!
 With low soft murmur, like a distant bee,
 Some spake, by thought-perplexing fear betrayed;
 And some a bold unerring answer made:
 How fluttered then thy anxious heart for me,
 Beloved Mother! Thou whose happy hand
 Had bound the flowers I wore, with faithful tie:
 Sweet flowers! at whose inaudible command
 Her countenance, phantom-like, doth re-appear:
 O lost too early for the frequent tear,
 And ill requited by this heart-felt sigh! (*Sonnet Series*, 195)

The title of the sonnet sets up the expectation of some recital of doctrinal questions and answers, but Wordsworth includes no mention of how he performed during this boyhood trial. The poem has nothing to do with his replies to the Pastor's oral examination, nor is it concerned with the value of the rejoinders he learned for that occasion. Wordsworth describes two types of response made by the children; the 'low soft murmur' (5) of a petrified child and the 'bold unerring answer' (7) of a confident one, yet his own performance is omitted as the poem shifts into an apostrophe to his mother. The reader anticipates that Wordsworth will depict the memory of *his* nervousness and the fluttering of *his* heart but instead the unexpected image (arising at the sonnet's volta) is the unrest of 'thy anxious heart for me, |

Beloved Mother!’ (8-9). The sonnet suddenly becomes an elegy in which no answers to the great questions of faith are provided.

The apostrophe to Wordsworth’s mother seems fleeting; it only lasts for two lines before he transfers the address, in mid-sentence, to ‘Sweet flowers! at whose inaudible command | Her countenance, phantom-like doth re-appear’ (11-12). The two apparent foci collapse into a single image and a single sentence because the memory and the apparition are indissociable from the flowers. Both the ‘new-wrought vest’ (2) and the ‘vernal posy’ (3) he wore were the work of his mother’s ‘happy hand’ (9). The ‘faithful tie’ (10) with which she bound the stems signifies the bond she had with him that day and the spiritual tie she continues to have with him since her death. Within the sonnet, neither Wordsworth nor his mother speaks, yet the fluttering of her heart is also the movement of his. The imagery is reminiscent of the Infant Babe passage of Book II of *The Prelude* where Wordsworth describes the ‘mute dialogues’ he held with his mother’s heart as he lay on her breast in infancy.³³ The dialogue is one of heart-felt sighs and it has outlasted the verbal exchanges that were so nervously required before the Pastor. The most important lesson Wordsworth learned that day was not catechetical; it was one of human sympathy and it was taught by her.

The sonnet conveys a vernal scene in which the posies displace the Pastor. The interior of the church is elided as the emphasis on the flowers seeps up from the sestet into the octave: the murmur of the children’s voices even figuratively gravitates towards the flowers ‘like a distant bee’ (5). The ‘inaudible command’ of the flowers speaks to the adult Wordsworth reiterating for him the sentiment he expressed in ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’ where ‘the meanest flower that blows’ gives ‘Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears’ (205-206).³⁴ In ‘Catechising’ Wordsworth’s loss lies ‘too early’ for frequent tears but he strikingly breaks away from his detached depiction of the Church in England to convey a presently felt emotional bond. In the final two lines of the sonnet Wordsworth

moves out of his 'phantom-like' experience and back into the present narrative voice. The poem and this 'heart-felt sigh' (14) register as insufficient responses to his inability to reclaim his mother for more than a moment, but they seize all of the historical momentum away from Wordsworth's sonnet series.

Wordsworth's deference to Beaumont in the Advertisement to *Ecclesiastical Sketches* echoes the poise within the sonnet sequence: it functions to acknowledge the omnipresence of living human relationships and emotional concerns amid fervid descriptions of historical and political episodes. *Ecclesiastical Sketches* is a Wordsworthian exercise in the careful balance of human love and institutional reason.

Wordsworth's plan for the sonnet series followed the shape of Christopher Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Biography* (1810). There is, however, an intriguing exception. Christopher Wordsworth covers material including 'the Reformation from Popery, and the glories and horrors attending that hard-fought struggle; the subsequent exorbitances and outrages of the Anti-Popish spirit, as exemplified by the Puritans' down to 'the Revolution of 1688, together with the ascertainment of the distinct nature and rights of an established Church, and a religious toleration; and the principles of the Non-jurors'.³⁵ Yet Wordsworth's sonnets break from this historical narrative at 'the Revolution of 1688' and the nonjurors are omitted. Alan G. Hill notices that the nonjurors are the only group to go unrecognised and speculates that this 'leaves the impression that for [Wordsworth] they represented a blind-alley in the historical process':

Wordsworth's treatment throughout [*Ecclesiastical Sketches*] is selective, however, and too much should not be made of their omission. But insofar as they formed a link between the Caroline Church and the Tractarians of the nineteenth century, the poet could have assimilated [the nonjurors] to his Virgilian perspectives had he wished to do so.³⁶

If Wordsworth did purposefully discount this particular Christian tradition from his history of the Church in England, is there any possible explanation for his doing so?

On some level, the pamphlet Lady Beaumont sent to the Wordsworths in 1809 detailing the exceptional life of the nonjuring ‘English Hermit’ may provide a possible explanation for this exclusion. First, as it was circulated by Lady Beaumont’s friends, Barnard’s narrative destabilized commonly conceived caricatures of the nonjurors: Thomas Gardiner proved to be an honourable nonjuror, not a raging Jacobite. Second, his identity as an ‘English Hermit’ placed the nonjurors in an ambiguous position in terms of the Catholic Emancipation debate: were they really role models showing the way past the Oath of Allegiance towards Catholic Relief? If so, they would potentially undermine Wordsworth’s purpose in writing the sonnets while the Emancipation Bill was being debated in Parliament. And thirdly, in light of this pamphlet and alongside the carefully constructed Advertisement and the sonnets’ delicate conjunction of emotional and historical material, any mention of the nonjurors could have disrupted that tentative balance Wordsworth had determined to strike. He aimed to convey his concern that the National Church would be vulnerable if positions of power were opened up to potentially disloyal Roman Catholics, whilst maintaining personal loyalty to his patrons and friends.

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¹ John Freeman-Mitford and Arthur James Plunkett, *The Catholic Question: Correspondence Between Lord Redesdale and the Earl of Fingall* (Dublin, 1804), 8 and 21.

²² *Cobbett’s Political Register*, 11 (1807), 614-17, 616. See James E. O’Neill, ‘The British Quarterlies and the Religious Question, 1802-1829’, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 52.3 (October 1966), 350–71 for further discussion.

³ Sheridan Gilley provides an overview of the literary exchange in ‘Nationality and Liberty, Protestant and Catholic: Robert Southey’s Book of the Church’, *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), 409–32. Coleridge’s *On the Constitution of the Church and State* was not published until the end of 1829.

⁴ *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca and London, 2003), 130.

⁵ Grasmere, Jerwood Centre, WLL/Beaumont, George/30, cited hereafter as WLL/30. The manuscript is in an unknown hand, not Lady Beaumont’s. I am grateful to Jeff Cowton and Rebecca Turner at the Jerwood Centre for help with accessing the original document. All quotation of the manuscript appears by permission of the Wordsworth Trust. Images of the manuscript are available via the database *Romanticism: Life, Literature and Landscape* (Adam Matthew Digital, 2011), <<http://www.romanticism.amdigital.co.uk/>>. The text states that Gardiner was born circa 1657. Thomas Barnard graduated from St John’s College, Cambridge, in 1742 and was made rector of Newmarket St Mary in 1752. From 1756 he was also rector at Withersfield, Suffolk, where he remained until his death in 1781. He became chaplain to the King in 1761: *The Clergy of the Church of England Database* (King’s College London), <<http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>> [accessed 13 September 2012].

⁶ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, pt. 1: 1806-1811*, ed. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 379, cited hereafter as *MY*, i. Coleridge was at this time residing with the Wordsworths at Allan Bank.

⁷ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (6 vols. Oxford, 1956-71), iii, 278. I have found no evidence that the document was ever published.

⁸ I am grateful to Norma Aubertin-Potter at the Codrington Library, Oxford, for confirming that Thomas Gardiner was a member of All Souls’ College between 1680 and 1691.

⁹ On nonjurors see J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832* (Cambridge, 2000), 66-83; Thomas Lathbury, *A History of the Nonjurors, Their Controversies and Writings* (London, 1845) and John Henry Overton, *The Nonjurors: Their Lives, Principles, and Writings* (London, 1902). Overton includes Thomas Gardiner in his list of clerical and lay nonjurors (478). Other notable nonjurors include Samuel Pepys, William Law, and John Evelyn.

¹⁰ Popular satirical plays such as Colley Cibber’s *The Non-Juror* (1717) were responsible for reinforcing prejudice.

¹¹ The emphasis on episcopacy aligns the nonjurors with only one other theological movement: the Tractarians. George Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?* (London, 2010), 6-7.

¹² For Wordsworth's description of the Blind Beggar see *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L Reed (Ithaca and London, 1991), book VII. lines 608-23.

¹³ Amusing examples include Peter Longueville, *The Hermit: or, The unparalleled sufferings, and surprising adventures, of Philip Quarll, an Englishman*, 7th edn (London, 1795); James Buckland and John Fielding, *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit who lived upwards of 200 years* (Springfield MA, 1786) and Thomas Parnell, *The Hermit* (London, 1762).

¹⁴ William Eusebius Andrews, *A Critical and Historical Review of Fox's Book of Martyrs* is a refutation of 'the greatest mass of falsehood and calumny ever issued against the social and religious principles of our Catholic fellow-men', (London, 1824), 1.

¹⁵ Sir George drew Wordsworth's attention to the controversy of this election in a letter of 6th November: WLL/19. All quotation of the letters of Sir George and Lady Beaumont has been transcribed from Grasmere, Jerwood Centre, WLL/Beaumont, George/ sequence, by permission of the Wordsworth Trust and cited as WLL followed by the letter number.

¹⁶ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, ed. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), 313.

¹⁷ Pitt's first term had ended in 1801 when he resigned over the King's refusal to negotiate over Catholic Relief: William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (London, 2004), 463-84. On the 'Ministry of all the Talents' see Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question 1690-1830* (Dublin, 1992), 285.

¹⁸ 'In the Grounds of Coleorton, the Seat of Sir George Beaumont, Bart. Leicestershire' and 'Inscription for a Seat in the Groves of Coleorton', in *Shorter Poems, 1807-1820*, ed. Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca and London, 1989), 100 and 107-8.

¹⁹ Roger D. Sell, 'Sir John Beaumont and His Three Audiences', in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham, 2009), 195-221, 196.

²⁰ Every known surviving copy of Beaumont's 1629 collection has pages 181-2 cancelled in order to censor 'On the Death of many Goode People': F. G. Kenyon, 'Some Missing Poems of Sir John Beaumont', *The Athenaeum*, 3234, (October 1889), 524.

²¹ Plans for the publication of Sir John Beaumont's poems are discussed in WLL/15, 10 August 1806: 'I am sure you will be pleased with my ancestor (Sir John's) poems, the more I read of them the more I am pleased, his

mind was elevated, pious, & *pure* [...]. I wish much to consult you on a new edition of Sir John's poems—I really think they might be of service in these profligate days'.

²² Her husband was descended from the family of Lady Arabella Fermor, whom Pope had celebrated in *The Rape of the Lock*: W. H. Turner, 'The Fermor Pedigree', *Notes and Queries*, 203 (November 1865), 424.

²³ *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (London, 1993), 57 and WLL/79. Mrs Fermor bequeathed Wordsworth £100 and he composed 'Elegiac Stanzas—addressed to Sir G. H. B. upon the death of his sister-in-law' and 'Cenotaph' in her honour.

²⁴ Evelyn M. Howe, 'Lady Beaumont, Wordsworth's Friend', *Studies in Romanticism*, 4.3 (April 1965), 143–57, 154.

²⁵ *Memoirs of the late Dr. Henry Bathurst, Lord Bishop of Norwich* (London, 1837), 71. In January 1809, as part of a series of articles on the developments of the Catholic debate, *The British Critic* printed a review of a letter from the Bishop of Norwich questioning the possibility of the King ever breaching his Coronation Oath.

²⁶ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, pt. 3: 1835-1839*, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1982), 218, footnote 1.

²⁷ Francis Wrangham, *A sermon preached 31 July 1808* (York, 1808), 20 and *MY*, i. 278.

²⁸ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, pt. 2: 1812-1820*, ed. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1970), 108 and 116, cited hereafter as *MY*, ii.

²⁹ For further examples of Wordsworth's discussion of the debate see *MY*, ii. 540, 542, 544 and *The Later Years, pt. 1: 1821-1828*, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1978), 20, 42, 55, 58 and 96-8 for the letter to Losh.

³⁰ In 1818 the government pledged to spend a million pounds erecting new churches; see Jackson's note to 'New Churches', *Sonnet Series*, 273.

³¹ Stuart Andrews describes the coincidences between *Ecclesiastical Sketches* and *The Book of the Church* in 'Wordsworth, Southey, and the English Church', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 44.1 (Winter 2013), 30–6.

³² *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (London, 1822), v-vi.

³³ *The Thirteen Book Prelude*, book II. line 283.

³⁴ *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca and London, 1983), 277.

³⁵ Preface to *Ecclesiastical Biography* quoted in *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets of William Wordsworth (1922)*, ed. Abbie Findley Potts (New Haven, 1922), 38.

³⁶ 'Poetry and Ecumenism: The Legacy of the Wordsworths', *Lambeth Palace Library Annual Review* (1992), 49–64, 54. Barbara T. Gates provides an account of the selectiveness and historical distortions of the sonnets:

‘Wordsworth’s Mirror of Morality: Distortions of Church History’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 12.2 (Spring 1981), 129-32.